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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the issues surrounding the transition from home or preschool to elementary school for children from low-income families, and examines the future direction of transition programs to help alleviate many of the difficulties that these families face. Noting that there are two venues for reform action, the curriculum and the family and community, the paper presents different visions for ideal schools. One such vision suggests that schools will become a coordinating agency for many of the services and support agencies needed by families. Another view stresses the need to make schooling more central to family and community while making family and community more central to schooling. The paper recommends that to make the transition to school easier for children and their families, transition programs need to stress: (1) curriculum continuity; (2) instructional quality; (3) safe and stimulating settings; (4) parent involvement partnerships; (5) medical, dental, and nutritional minimums; and (6) value-added assessment. (MDM)

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Building Bridges from Home to School

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Introduction

To look toward the future and think how schools could be restructured to better meet the needs of children and their families, we should look at the reality of the present. There are two themes that may guide reformers; family diversity and common family needs.

It is a serious understatement to say that every family is different from the next. Children in the '90's are growing up in families that vary on virtually every demographic characteristic. The rich variety in family composition and function has challenged educators to adjust everything from their terminology to their school feeding programs. The well-known facts (Washington & Oyemade, 1985) that more children live in poverty, fewer live in traditional family structures (Brice Heath & McLaughlin, 1987) and home circumstances are less predictable have produced some positive changes in America's schools. Many of the changes have

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been driven or funded by federal and state initiatives. Teachers are encouraged to be more sensitive to family diversity and to think of new ways to optimize the educational effects of school. Child and family diversity will certainly be one of the key themes in any future reform movements.

To speak of common family needs would seem to contradict the earlier attention to diversity. However, planning for school reform can also be informed by considering the common needs presented by virtually all families (Swick, 1989). This concluding statement and suggestions for future action revolve around the common needs of children and their families. I believe that they can have the collateral benefit of producing schools that are more responsive and supportive of diversity. It is my intention to point out some of the bridges that can carry children and their families into a preferable future - a future that will be better for them and better for everyone else too. There are two venues for reform action; within the school (the "curriculum") and outside the school (the family/community context). To recognize that what happens in one affects the other is to prepare for reform (Coleman, 1991).

One new vision of school

Ed Zigler from Yale University (one of the originators of Head Start and prominent spokesman for educational improvement) has described his ideal school of the future. His vision would make the school a coordinating agency for many of the services and support agencies needed by families. This concept has been

described as "one-stop shopping" for family services. The school would educate the child while providing a wide range of social, medical and economic services. The services have been dubbed "wrap-around" services, indicating that the school program is the core but that the family is the key client. Zigler clearly recognized that no teacher can teach a hungry, sick or fearful child. He also recognized that the school is the most likely institution to reach families in need. The patchwork of services and agencies in most American cities is clearly confusing and inefficient (Jordan, 1993).

The common needs of families can be illustrated with one group of families present in our schools today - those eligible for Chapter I services. An eligible family is usually also qualified for:

-- food stamps

-- public housing or rent supplements

-- JTPA and other training programs

-- health services, such as Medicaid

-- special tax exemptions

-- other "emergency" services.

Continuity of services and support systems is one of the critical structures to consider as we think about bridges to the future.

State and national signals

When we sample the national scene, we find some interesting hints that big

changes are just around the corner:

1. There are rumors of quick new funding initiatives coming from the Administration of Children, Youth and Families. ACYF is the parent agency for Head Start, and a number of training, expansion and development grants are currently under consideration. Hopefully, any new action will include articulation between the agency and the education community.

2. A federal research signal is contained in the large expenditure of ACYF funds to study the transition from Head Start in to the schools. Hardin County, Tennessee is the site of one of these projects. The research is coordinated by a team from Vanderbilt, including a connection with the FASTTRACK prevention program. Children who graduate from Head Start and move into the public schools on bridges to make the transition more effective will be followed for three years.

3. Stimulated by the 21st Century Classroom Program in Tennessee and comparable state-wide efforts across the country, there is strong encouragement to schools for reform. These include curriculum reform, new views of teaching, value-added assessment and stronger parent involvement models.

4. The new Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, was an education-oriented governor of South Carolina. He often talked about the relationship between education and other services to build strong communities (Zerchykov, 1986). He reminds us that broadening the service spectrum at school is a tool for growing a

strong economy -- and that a strong economy allows society the resources necessary to build strong families and schools.

5. There are also signals from the business community. In California, Helwlett Packard runs a K-1 school at the plant site so workers are closer to their childrens' education. Nations Bank just set up a $10 million fund for child and elder care in ten cities nationally. Private companies, newspapers, banks, phone companies and chambers of commerce are all becoming prominent players in support of educational reform. These entities recognize the linkage between home, school and work. When they form genuine partnerships with educators, great things can happen.

6. The continued availability of carefully crafted and evaluated Follow Through models is another indicator that the home/preschool/school continuum needs our restructuring attention. The models that build bridges along this continuum, both in the classroom and with the community, will be the examples to guide new program planning.

It would appear that we are on the verge of finally realizing the simple but powerful admonition from Urie Bronfenbrenner. He said that the way to improve education and society is to make schooling more central to family and community while making family and community more central to schooling (Bronfenbrenner, 1985). If this kind of an ideal is to come to pass, then we must define school reform and restructuring in two simultaneous domains. Future success depends on

preparing children for school and *preparing school for children.* Unless we do both together, we can never achieve the synergy of coordinated action.

Perspectives from research

The Head Start Transition Project (Kagan, 1992) studied 15 Head Start sites and identified the following elements as effective strategies:

-- written agreements with the schools

-- orderly passing of records

-- training of parents

-- transition efforts continuing.

Kagan also recognized that "altering community commitment" improved the chances of a smooth transition from early education to public school education. When Love and Marcon (1992) conducted their Transition Study of 1,200 schools in 850 school districts, they concluded that transition was not a high priority. Both of these studies urged changes and improvements in the schools so that transition is easy for the children and their families.

Continuity - the future bridge

What is really needed to optimize the early years of life and education for every child? What should we start working on tomorrow? The theme in this paper has been the concept of bridge - a mechanism that allows <u>all</u> travelers to move smoothly from one place to another. The bridge does not discriminate; it facilitates the journey. We end this exercise with a grocery list of building blocks

- components that you can use as you build your particular bridges.

A. Let us remind ourselves constantly that children are members of families and communities, and act accordingly.

B. Let us commit to continuity of place, people, curriculum and services for our younger children.

C. Let us accept Goal I on preschool readiness, and realize that everything that happens from conception to school entry affects the educability of the child. We can shift some of our attention to primary prevention and save a lot of time and energy from remediation and reaction.

D. Let us figure out how to make our wrap-around services financially sustaining. (One great example is the emerging model at Caldwell School in Nashville, Tennessee. They started with an excellent preschool intervention program for young children and their families. Then they moved health and social services to the site, and embraced United Way's "Success by Six" model. Now they are wrapping a business /training layer around the center. Watch Caldwell - they are making it work.)

E. There is a desperate need for high-quality day care in virtually every school neighborhood. Teaching and caring for children for a few hours per day is just insufficient for most families (Gullo, 1990). Every school can learn from those innovative school systems where they provide full range day care model. If the school tackles the 9+ hours/day child care responsibility, they reduce the

frightening "latch key" phenomena, support families to maintain steady employment, and assure safe and stimulating care for the children of the community all in one package. What school systems have to learn is how to meet family and community child care needs in ways that sustain themselves financially. Schools are also more likely to assure higher quality of child care than the virtually unregulated situations that exist in most communities.

F. Schools can once again become the central focus of community life for all citizens. Every kindergarten could use a few grandparents every day. Maximum use of expensive school facilities for community education is an efficient and powerful way to bring people together.

G. If schools become active community centers, they can become total family support systems (Melaville & Blank, 1991). Schools are well prepared to help whole families become more literate, more technically competent and enriched by music and the arts. A parent should be able to learn about everything from job training opportunities to homemaking services through the schools referral/matching effort.

This list sounds more like it was created by a social worker than an educator, but I have not forgotten the primary mission of schools in my future scan. Nor have the forward-thinking school districts where strategic planning is preparing them for these and other major changes (e.g. Blum & Kneidek, 1991; Nebgen, 1991). Broad-based planning is more likely to produce more responsive schools, which

can help children and family make these critical transitions.

The education bridge

We have wasted huge amounts of time and resources building parallel and even competitive systems for educating our children and supporting their families. The initial discontinuity inherent in the array of government and private agencies that serve families is one example that can inform us how not to do it in the future. So let us revisit the theme of school restructuring and think together about changes that will bring about improvement. Here are a few, and they all relate to continuity:

[] Curriculum continuity - The learning experience for a particular child from home to preschool to school should have some overarching connections. This means that the teachers who teach this same child have to be in contact with each other, and that the organizational barriers have to be eased (Cohen, 1990). One practical step would be to allocate staff development time for preschool, Head Start and school personnel to meet regularly. Another would be to evaluate and select Follow Through and other program models because they "fit" between the preschool experience and the next stages of the child's education. A third would be to help families be the buffer as children negotiate new settings and experiences.

[] Instructional quality - We have a much better idea of the more effective and the less effective ways to teach. A universal commitment to instructional

excellence, with necessary resources and rewards, can contribute to a seamless learning experience for children.

[] Safe and stimulating settings - All places where children learn should be expected to meet the same standards for safety. Clean and exciting spaces and materials are essential.

[] Parent involvement partnerships - The frequent and rich interaction between families and schools is the critical first step in forming close relationships. The additive effect of home support has a powerful effect on student learning, and the secondary effect of helping the family become a more educative force in the child's life.

[] Medical, dental and nutritional minimums - Along every step of the educational path, the physical well being of the children must be assured. When this assurance outside of school is not present, then the school should do whatever is necessary so that no child is sick, hurting or hungry.

[] Value-added assessment - The ferment in the testing arena ought to produce new ways to evaluate student performance that contributes to it. Three days of one-way testing to fill file cabinets or data banks needs serious question.

This list could run on and on, and I am sure that others have their own building blocks for our collective bridge to the future. The argument here is not which small element to change, but to broaden our scope of school (Powell, 1991). School is no longer a place or building separate from the rest of the community,

school is a function of the entire community. The teacher of the future does not just deliver a curriculum. The teacher coordinates and facilitates the overall education for the child, expecting cooperation from the family and the larger community.

Final vision

If schools like this are to be in our future, then let us become the architects and bridge builders that make it happen. The "waves of change" (Brandt, 1991) are coming faster and faster, so preparing schools for change is certainly in order. There is no such thing as an inevitable future; there are only preferable futures that we all must invent.

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